

Five Tips For Getting Results From Direct Mail

by Tom Herrmann

Direct mail accounts for more than half of the total mail received by a household (65%), according to a June 2001 study by Pitney Bowes. With so much competition for people's time, how can a company make sure its direct mail piece is relevant to the recipient and doesn't end up in the garbage? While the actual printed piece is important for success, a well-planned campaign that starts long before the mail piece reaches the mailbox will ensure the highest response rates. Follow these steps the next time you get ready to conduct a direct mail campaign:

Start with a clean, highly targeted database

A direct mail campaign is only truly cost effective if the database is current and the mail piece is opened and read by the intended recipient. Sending a mail piece to an undeliverable address or the wrong person at the address is money wasted. Updating files prior to mailing, through one of the postal processes, produces solid results — to the tune of over 6 billion addresses corrected through National Change of Address (NCOA) in 2000. As of July, 2002, NCOA will include 48 months of address correction information; FASTforward covers 13 months. Each of these services is derived from Change of Address Orders filed by relocating customers and is offered by the United States Postal Service through non-exclusive licensees to be used in the preparation of mailing. Each is updated on a weekly basis. If your targeted mailing location is in a rural area you might consider using a lesser-known service — the Locatable Address Conversion System (LACS). The USPS LACS file provides new addresses where a 911 emergency system has been implemented.

Analyze Your Database

A database with accurate names and addresses is a good starting point, but businesses need to know more about their customers than simply where they live. Continually analyze your data and add demographic information on customers as it becomes available. Look to see what buying patterns are emerging. Is your product more popular in the summer months or the winter months? Are more women buying your product than men? Use this information to plan your campaign and to add to your database. With this additional data, you can easily create a mailing piece that is personalized to each customer's needs.

Define your goals and design your mail piece around them

The goal of your mail piece may be to generate immediate sales, increase awareness of your company, generate sales leads or build customer loyalty. Whatever the case may be, make sure the mail piece is designed to reach that goal. For instance, to generate immediate sales, a retail outlet may send a postcard announcing an upcoming sale. By including a coupon on the postcard, the company now has an easy way to measure the results of the campaign. To increase awareness of your company, a postcard is probably not the right choice. Consider a company brochure instead with the company's web address and toll free number included for tracking purposes.

Use integrated communications to reach your audience

Direct mail may be appropriate for reaching a portion of your database, but e-mail or fax may be more effective for the remaining portion. A combination of methods may be the most effective. Don't be hesitant to use integrated communications to reach an audience. Use your website to capture e-mail addresses and make sure to include them in your database.

Consider web-based direct mail services

According to the Direct Marketing Association, the average direct mail campaign takes more than three weeks to launch. If you need your message sent faster, consider a web-based service. With a turn-around time of days as opposed to weeks, your message will reach your audience faster, resulting in quicker results. Faster launches to a campaign will also allow for smaller "test" mailings that will allow you to evaluate response rates before sending larger targeted campaigns. These web-based services are often more cost-effective than traditional direct mail processes.

Direct mail continues to be one of the most effective marketing tools available. It can provide immediate

results. At a time when every business needs to communicate with its customers cost-effectively, direct mail is one of your best targeted marketing solutions.

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